

Can There Be a SALT III?

By KENNETH ADELMAN

Over the coming legislative season, the Senate will assume center stage with its SALT II ratification debate. Some observers feel there's a good chance it will approach the drama and excitement of its 1919-20 debate over the Versailles Treaty and membership in the League of Nations.

Regardless of the Senate's response before the final curtain falls, SALT II is destined to become the last act in the current era of nuclear arms negotiations. The Carter administration may profess that ratification of SALT II is essential for the really serious arms control measures anticipated for SALT III. But it cannot stop the train of history, which precludes a SALT III *per se*. Technological and political forces compel a new generation of nuclear arms negotiations, one quite distinct from SALT I and II in three key respects.

First, the measurements of U.S.-Soviet strategic force must be altered. In SALT I and II, nuclear launch vehicles (i.e. intercontinental missiles, and later, bombers) represented the primary measure of strategic strength. This was quite convenient since satellite photography could verify a treaty based on this one element.

Soviet Progress

Strategic might, however, can no longer be comfortably equated with this single measure. Due to technological breakthroughs and the dictates of SALT I itself, recent Soviet progress has been most impressive precisely in other areas of the strategic equation: in MIRVing their missiles, augmenting civil defense, launching killer satellites (which threaten our communications and control systems) and improving ICBM accuracy (which enables them to more than double the destructive power of their already awesome heavy missiles). The U.S. in turn has accelerated cruise missile technology.

These areas have become essential in appraising strategic strength. But they defy reliable verification via satellite, a critical consideration since no administration or Senate would consent to a nonverifiable nuclear arms treaty with the Soviets. To do so would be—as Dr. Johnson once said about second marriages—a triumph of hope over experience. It is sad but true that weapons technology is outpacing the capabilities of acceptable intelligence means to monitor strategic systems.

Second, the type of weapons included in the negotiations must be expanded to encompass those based in or targeting Western Europe. SALT I and II covered intercontinental systems, U.S.- and Soviet-based systems capable of striking the other.

Again technology has rendered a veritable myriad of nuclear weapons with less than intercontinental range. These "gray area" systems—which defy the previously valid black/white dichotomy of strategic/tactical systems—include Soviet weapons aimed at Europe (e.g. the SS-20 mobile missile and the Backfire bomber) and Europe-based systems targeting the U.S.S.R. (e.g. air-launched cruise missiles, aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean, and nuclear-armed missiles for European deployment in the 1980s now under consideration within NATO).

Third, the number of actors on the stage of nuclear arms negotiations must

include the loss of American strategic superiority and unrelenting Soviet buildup is sinking into the political consciousness of Europeans, making them increasingly disgruntled at remaining mere spectators. Inclusion in any subsequent negotiations of the "gray area" systems, which even more directly affect their fate, would oblige on-stage European participation.

In short, future nuclear arms negotiations must be broadened in these three ways. Even SALT II may have to undergo alteration along these lines before final Senate ratification is possible.

Over the long haul, such expanded negotiations will prove vastly more confounding

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and intricate than even the tortuous SALT process to date. Pivotal negotiations on technically perplexing matters in such a multilateral framework—one involving a dozen nations on the Western side alone—will prove a staggering diplomatic task indeed. The long-dormant troop reduction talks in Europe (MBFR) offer little grounds for optimism.

What if such expanded negotiations were to prove infeasible? What if the SALT process were flung on the dungheap of history, as the Soviet propagandist phrase goes?

Many would justifiably lament the loss of a continual, high-level forum for the superpowers to discuss this critical topic. SALT would be missed as a means whereby both sides admit strategic parity so that neither claims superiority. If adroitly handled, SALT could have proven marginally useful in enhancing crisis stability, reducing the arms race and warming relations a degree or two with Moscow. The end of SALT would in fact sound the death knell of detente, 1972-style, because SALT now stands as the sole remnant of a once-trumpeted network of relations binding together the superpowers' fate and welfare.

But the mourning period for SALT may be fleeting. The international atmosphere would be healthier, though decidedly not cheerier, without the sanctification of SALT. A stable U.S.-Soviet truce based on mutual distrust is preferable to aberrations of friendship accompanied by unsavory political and military Soviet conduct.

The burial of SALT would resurrect U.S. strategic programs as first and foremost a matter of national security and not primarily one of arms control. It would awaken Americans from their torpor to the stark fact that SALT, or any variant thereof, is simply incapable of halting the Soviet strategic buildup. Indeed, since SALT I the Soviet Union has deployed four

This vastly unequal momentum of U.S.S.R. strategic programs will not vanish; the CIA now estimates Soviet strategic spending at three times that of the U.S. with no relief in sight.

The demise of SALT could prove most valuable in ending a series of egregious American delusions on Soviet intentions.

The series dates back at least to the spring of 1965 when a proud Defense Secretary McNamara beamed during an interview that "the Soviets have decided that they have lost the quantitative" strategic arms race and, better yet, "are not seeking to engage us in that contest." Lest the point be missed, he added: "There is no indication that the Soviets are seeking to develop a strategic nuclear force as large as ours." Now Mr. McNamara's successor must reckon with Soviet strategic equality if not superiority. According to a compelling Defense Nuclear Agency study, the U.S.S.R. today leads the U.S. in 33 of 41 categories of strategic power.

Such delusions continue apace. Last April, Secretary Vance waxed eloquent on how conclusion of a SALT II accord "will begin to change the whole character of the [Soviet-American] relationship, put it on the right track again"—something SALT I failed miserably to do and the far more dubious SALT II is palpably incapable of achieving. Last July, he raised the ante yet higher by claiming that suspension of the SALT talks would increase "the danger of mutual annihilation." To take the Secretary's logic seriously, one must imagine a Senate turnaround of SALT II conceivably provoking an enraged Kremlin to unleash the nukes. One hopes the Soviets are more prudent.

Mr. Carter's Rhetoric

Mr. Carter assumed office vacuously considering SALT II imperative to begin "eliminating nuclear weapons from the face of the earth." The President now portrays SALT as an alternative to "the resumption of a massive nuclear arms race" which would be exceedingly costly for both Moscow and Washington. Such rhetoric flies in the face of more scrupulous analysis. A recently published CIA report, for example, concludes that SALT II "would not, in itself, significantly alter" future Soviet defense spending. Such spending is expected to grow 4%-5% per year—much as it has done over past decades regardless of poor harvests, industrial setbacks, the chilling of the Cold War or the warming of detente.

Such delusions are distinctly American. The Soviet Union, for all its innumerable sins, cannot be condemned for their propagation. Unlike the Americans, Kremlin leaders have been most circumspect in their claims for SALT. Again unlike the Americans, Russian military and strategic writings mention SALT peripherally if at all. The Soviets have expected scarcely more than minor tinkering in their defense programs because of SALT. It is time that Americans did likewise. If this be the ultimate price for SALT I or SALT II (if miraculously ratified by the Senate) constituting the final SALT accord, it seems one well worth paying.

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